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ABSTRACT

The study of language acquisition requires that the analyst identify the learner's target and have available a grammatical description of the target. In the case of the Caribbean Creole environment, special caution is required in identifying the learner's target because substantial variation is intrinsic to the input and ambient language. Existing studies of language varieties in the region must not be assumed to provide appropriate descriptions of the input or ambient language for a particular learner. Both the description of the language to be acquired and the account of the process of acquisition must be based on the same corpus produced in the same learning environment by the learner and the participants in his language socialization. The corpus can be enhanced by eliciting from the participants their notion of what the learner is attempting to say and ought to be saying. This procedure is important for providing access not only to notions of grammaticality but also notions of appropriateness. Given the interlock between speech behavior and identity in these settings, attention must be devoted to the acquisition of the ability to manipulate socially linked variants of a variable. (Author)

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ACQUIRING LANGUAGE IN A CREOLE SETTING: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

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The challenge of acquisition in Creole environments

Creole environments offer an opportunity for the study of language acquisition in settings which contrast strongly with those in which mainstream thought in language acquisition studies has been established. In Creole environments, the target of the learner is ill-defined both because of the intensely variable nature of the input and because of the absence of exactly pertinent grammatical descriptions. These circumstances present a theoretical and methodological challenge to the analyst, viz. the determination of the true target of acquisition, the nature of acquisition in the face of such a variable environment as well as the internalization of control of meaningful variation by a learner. This paper will elaborate on the challenge and suggest a method for developing a corpus for study in such environments.

The usual environment for acquisition studies

Although variation is present in all language acquisition settings, it has not been a purposefully included conditioning factor of the mainstream study of language acquisition. Orthodox knowledge of language acquisition has been established by studying children who are exposed to a limited number of previously described language varieties (and preferably one) modelled by formally educated mainstream users. The child is supposed to be acquiring a specified language for which an ample referential description is available. These descriptions have tended to be of the static type in which variation is a footnote rather than a determinant of the description. By contrast with Caribbean sociolinguistic complexes, such homogeneous environments may be termed sterile.

Types of learning environments in the Caribbean

The Caribbean sociolinguistic complex is a rich environment which obliges the analyst to cope with variation in much the same way as the child learner. Several types of micro-settings may be identified.

Type I. Consistent monolingual The consistent monolingual environment is the classic monolingual environment and it is atypical of the Caribbean. Speakers would interact in the presence of the learner and with the learner in a single code. Shifts of register,

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style or situational variety would be linguistically within a single grammatical system. In strict terms, available audio-visual media would be in the variety used by the speakers in the accessible environment.

Type II. Leaky monolingual Much more common would be the leaky monolingual environment in which those who interact with the learner produce a single code, but the learner is exposed in addition to another code from audio sources lacking the physical presence of a speaker or other pragmatic context for interpretation.

Type III. Monolingual with secondary input In the third kind of environment, monolingual with secondary input, another code is present in the environment and is supported by pragmatic contexts although the immediate caregivers do not themselves use it. The important difference between this setting and the Type II setting is that the secondary language is overheard in contexts that have pragmatic support. This type of environment is much more prevalent than the Type I environment.

Type IV. Special case in multi-code environment The fourth type of micro-setting may be summarized as one in which the learner is a special addressee. The immediate socializers have more than one variety available but use only one with the learner in keeping with a household decision about what language they wish the learner to acquire.

Type V. Routine case in multi-code environment In the fifth case, the routine case, the learner is addressed in only one of the available codes of the socializers in keeping with a general community convention (as opposed to the household decision of type IV) that a specific variety is the appropriate one for use with children.

Type VI. Open access In the open access case, the socializers command more than one code and the learner is not excluded from any of them. The difference between Type VI and Type V may be important at later stages of acquisition when reported asymmetries in child-parent communication have the effect of obliging children to use varieties closer to the standard than those used by their parents.

Obviously, one can study acquisition in any setting but the high frequency and commonplace nature of the Type V/VI environments recommends them as primary for study in the Caribbean sociolinguistic complex.

Linguistic repertoire vs Language

Within the above micro-settings, several different factors may be responsible for variation including the existence of a creole dialect continuum and the practice of code switching. The notion of a creole

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dialect continuum has dominated the literature on Caribbean speech varieties for nearly 2 decades. Its characterization, analysis and exemplification in the work, inter alia, of De Camp (1971), Bickerton (1975) and most recently Rickford (1987) attests to the virtual inevitability of variable data in Caribbean environments. Current continuum theory treats drift across lectal boundaries within a multi-dimensional sociolinguistic space which is presented as a single interlocked system. Variation is intrinsic to such a construct.

Code switching in response to established social cues can be noted as a contributor to the variation that is characteristic of the Caribbean sociolinguistic complex. Code switching may also result from a speaker's inability to complete a communication in a given code because of a break in competence. Thus, although a conventional analysis of a speaker's behaviour may assign parts of his performance to different language systems, his speech behaviour may constitute a single system of communication within the relevant Caribbean society.

In these circumstances, the salience of variation challenges the notion that a learner is acquiring a language, a pre-existent entity. A large proportion of children acquire a speech repertoire that may include varieties that cannot be unequivocally ascribed to a single language. Rather than acquiring a language, these learners would be acquiring a linguistic repertoire that allows them to interact within their societal range. We therefore need to focus on the idea "linguistic repertoire" rather than the idea "a language". The point is critical for shaping relevant field procedures and analytical processes.

Pinning down the variable target

The first challenge for the study of acquisition in a Caribbean socio-linguistic complex is the determination of the target of the child given that variation is present and influential at the level of the individual household. Information from the environment of an informant P illustrates the extent to which a single household can offer variable exposure and output.

Recorded between 2;8 and 3;0, P is the second youngest of 7 children in a household. Her mother [J], a teenager, her grandmother [M], almost 40, and her grandmother's husband [R], late 40s, show very different varieties of the spectrum of possible speech in rural Trinidad. Her grandmother had secondary level education up to the 5th Form (approx age 16) in a semi-urban setting; her grandmother's husband has had limited elementary schooling in a rural setting; her mother left secondary school in their village setting at Form 2 (approx age 13); four of the other children in the household are at school.

Examples of the variation to which the learner is exposed are presented in the appendix. Drawn from the same 30 minute recording, these examples of input and ambient language illustrate variation in pronominal selection, tense-aspect marking, and form of a locative question word in the speech of the child's grandfather, grandmother and mother. In an environment of such diversity, it becomes important to be able to identify the direction of movement of the informant.

Let us assume that within the household Concept C is expressed by variants V_1, V_2, V_3 ... V_n (where the variant is a form, element or structure). The learner at some initial point may be recorded as producing a form F_1. If we are to track movement towards a target we need to ascertain which of variants V_1 ... V_n is being represented by F_1. It will be frequently easy, sometimes difficult and at other times impossible to tell. However, it is pertinent and important to attempt to determine which variant the household considers that the learner is targeting or ought to be targeting, since it is ultimately their response to her output that will contribute to its realignment in the socially acceptable direction.

Working without a grammatical description

The second challenge for the study of acquisition in such environments arises from the fact that no existing descriptions of the systems of communication would allow the analyst to have a predetermined reference point for the target of the learner. The disadvantage of this circumstance is more apparent than real. The fact is that there can be no valid description of a learner's target unless that description is derived from the interactions of the learning environment. A corpus created in accordance with that principle would have the characteristics of being a valid representation of actual input and ambient language, permitting focus on the relationship between form and function as the child perceives it, and ensuring that judgments of grammaticality and acceptability are based on data actually available to the learner rather than on a grammar that is hypothetical as far as the learner and his/her immediate environment are concerned.

This position does not deny the value of the already published analyses of Caribbean language varieties; it places them in a different perspective, a function of ultimate reference rather than assumed target of the learner. The true target of the learner can be defined and described realistically only by examining the available rather than the purported input and ambient language. The corpus for study would be created by the recorded interaction between the learner and the participants in his exposure to communication. Both the description of the target communication system (i.e. the community language) and the description of the acquisition process must come from those data.

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An important secondary resource

Satisfactory acquisition is the fulfillment of norms expected by the environment; hence, it is necessary to determine which variants the household considers that the learner is targeting or ought to be targeting. In this regard, the participants in the interactions recorded with the child can be invited to state what they consider the learner to have said and thus provide access to their perception of grammaticality. This procedure would be similar to the elicitation of repairs which has been applied to other purposes including tests of children's understanding of various concepts and structures. In this instance, it can provide knowledge on the expectations of speakers of the target varieties and allow establishment of one major criterion of satisfactory acquisition. In addition, it would enhance our knowledge of variation by providing indices of the expectations of the adult users of the system of communication.

Acquisition of acceptable control of variation

In Caribbean sociolinguistic complexes, variation is not only diagnostic of speaker history but also functional within communication acts. Hence, part of what a learner needs to acquire is control over socially appropriate variation. Children acquiring language in a Caribbean sociolinguistic complex need to learn the different sets of linguistic behaviours that are acceptable within the same community context. This may not differentiate these environments from other learning contexts but there is a potentially more compelling consideration that makes attention to this detail important.

Of special relevance to Caribbean sociolinguistic complexes is a conclusion of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) on the evolution of speech behaviour and self-identity which can be paraphrased as follows:

> Individuals create their system of verbal behaviour to resemble that of the groups with which they wish to identify, subject to the constraints of their ability to identify the groups, the strength and clarity of their motivation, the adequacy of their opportunities for learning and their ability to learn.

Their work adequately supports this view and it is clearly relevant to choices in variable socio-linguistic space. One cannot study language acquisition in these environments without including the acquisition of variable behaviour and of knowledge on tolerance of difference within the speaker's immediate environment. The child learns how to maintain group membership, and how to manipulate variants without threatening desired relationships. It is these skills which control the shift behaviour that has been discussed repeatedly in respect of continua.

Summary

The study of language acquisition requires that the analyst identify the learner's target and have available a grammatical description of the target. In the case of the Caribbean Creole environment, special caution is required in identifying the learner's target because substantial variation is intrinsic to the input and ambient language. Existing studies of language varieties in the region must not be assumed to provide appropriate descriptions of the input or ambient language for a particular learner. Both the description of the language to be acquired and the account of the process of acquisition must be based on the same corpus produced in the learning environment by the learner and the participants in his/her language socialization. The corpus can be enhanced by eliciting from the participants their notion of what the learner is attempting to say and ought to be saying. This procedure is important for providing access not only to notions of grammaticality but also to notions of appropriateness. Given the interlock between speech behaviour and identity in these settings, attention has to be devoted to the acquisition of ability to manipulate socially linked variants of a variable.

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APPENDIX

Examples of variation in input and ambient language

Age of child 2;8 Date 4th February 1988

Feature: Pronominal form

Utterance #	Speaker	Utterance
13	grandfather (general, about child, in presence of child)	ə gɪ̃ tek ɪt ɔt frʌm ʃɪ bɪkɔz ʃɪ tu ba.d. I'll take it away from her because she's too naughty.
16,17	grandmother (to child in reference to sibling)	let ʌ kʌmɪn, let ʌ kʌm ɪn. Let her come in, let her come in.
138	grandfather (to child, message to be conveyed to mother)	tɛl hʌ kʊk (...) fʊ mi. Tell her to cook one for me.
244	grandfather (to child, in reference to sibling)	tɛl ʃɪ kʌm awt! Tell her to come out.

Feature: WH locative

Utterance #	Speaker	Utterance
67	mother (to child)	wɛ jʊ goɪn? Where are you going?
80	grandfather (to child)	an wɛʃɔɹ jʊ kipɪn jʊ kreɔn? And where would you keep your crayons?

Feature: Tense-aspect marking

Utterance #	Speaker	Utterance
23	grandmother (to child)	hu gɛv ju dat pɪʧʌ? Who gave you that picture?
30	grandmother (to child)	hu gɪv ju di tʃɛ? Who gave you the chair?

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